DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 378 021 RC 019 937

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TITLE Work with Girls and Young Women at Risk.
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 8p.; In: Adventure-Based Interventions with Young People in Trouble and at Risk. Proceedings of a National One-Day Conference "Adventure-Based Interventions" (April 22, 1994) and a Study Weekend "Enabling Troubled Youth" (Ambleside, England, United Kingdom, April 22-24, 1994); see RC 019 931.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Dropout Prevention; *Females; Foreign Countries; *High Risk Students; High Schools; High School Students; Homogeneous Grouping; *Individual Development; *Outdoor Education; Role Models; Sex Role; Sex Stereotypes; *Therapeutic Recreation; Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS England; *Single Sex Programs

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of outdoor education activities with adolescent at-risk girls. Many young women in this age group unconsciously adopt stereotypical female roles and perceive their identities in terms of their relationships to males. A women-only group provides space in which girls and young women can search for their identities, relate to other women without the pressures of a mixed-gender group, and explore issues particular to young women. The Leeds (England) local education agency sponsors such groups for girls at risk for substance abuse, nonattendance at school, or petty crime. A typical group contains 10 girls aged 14-15. The outdoor education activities pursued by the group have as their main objective the personal development acquired through participation, not just acquisition of skills. The presence of a confident and competent woman leader forces the group to question preconceived images about roles and abilities. Although groups vary in length, a minimum commitment of ten 2-hour sessions is recommended. A longer potential group lifespan increases the probability that significant learning will be achieved. The progression of the group must be measured by effective and continuous evaluation related to negotiated aims and learning outcomes. Negotiated aims are critical to the demonstration of positive change within individuals. The skill of the group facilitator determines the extent to which personal development and positive outcomes can be transferred to negative aspects of everyday life. (SV)

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WORK WITH GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN AT RISK

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RC019937

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Work with Girls and Young Women at Risk

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Abi works for Leeds Youth Service and is responsible for supporting five youth projects, developing groupwork, and initiating new projects and events. She also works part-time as an instructor at a Children's Centre providing activity holidays for disadvantaged children in Leeds.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the use of Outdoor Education Activities with girls and young women deemed as being "at risk" and to determine what, if any, advantages there may be from this as a positive mode of intervention. For the purpose of clarity the term young women will be used throughout to mean girls and young women aged 13-16. The term "at risk", for the purpose of this paper, shall refer to risks as identified by relevant agencies, ie schools, police, Education Welfare - those risks including risk of offending, non-attendance at school, solvent and/or drug abuse. In order to demonstrate the effectiveness of Outdoor Education Activities I intend to draw on my experience of work in this area specifically with young women, although some of the arguments may be transferable to work with mixed gender groups. Under each heading I shall illustrate my arguments with reference to my own experiences. This paper is a personal interpretation of work I have been involved with and does not necessarily represent the opinion of the local authority for whom I work.

As a committed user of Outdoor Education Activities with young people for five years, I have worked with a wide range of individuals and groups in terms of abilities, age and motivation. I intend to focus on my experience with one group of young women in order to illustrate how Outdoor Activities may be effectively used to positive ends.

Why Segregate Gender Groups?

When deciding to opt for single sex groups it is crucial to examine your own motivation for this. If your personal aims for work with young women or indeed young men, are not clear, it will be difficult to justify your decisions to the group and outside agencies. I hope to explain my motivation for this work through this paper.

The majority of young women with whom I have worked in the 13-16 age group appear to have internalised a "secondary citizen" complex, ie assumed roles of inferior ability and worth, which is neither deliberate nor, in most cases, recognised. It is evident, however, when gender groups are mixed, stereotypical roles are adopted - the young women are loathed to look "silly" in front of the boys and are more comfortable playing a supportive and nurturing role. When segregated, young women no longer have the established roles to conform to. As stereotypes are explored the young women may well feel uncomfortable as they search for either a new self-imposed role within the group or for their actual selves. Within this context young women are given space to lose inhibitions and historically acquired feminine roles.

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This can be disorientating as it is probably their first experience of a women-only space. It should be remembered that girls often develop their identify as a woman not through individual endeavours to grow but through their relationships with men and boys. As well as an opportunity to try whatever activities are planned the young women are given the opportunity to relate to other women without the pressures associated with mixed gender groups, ie as boys may try to appear macho, young women may feel they have to appear attractive to the boys. This can often be difficult when they have a harness and helmet on ready for a climbing session!

A single gender group provides scope for work - whatever the chosen mode of work - which is not available within a mixed gender group. Issues particular to young women, eg issues concerned with relationships, can be addressed within a safe environment but more importantly, young women will have the opportunity for discovery and remotivation, free of the barriers imposed by mixed gender groups.

Staffing

I would argue for women workers to facilitate girls' groups - with respect to Outdoor Activities this offers more than just a total women-only space as will be discussed further in this paper. There may be, however, the argument for positive male role models to be introduced by including male workers within the group and in fact resources may determine the staffing as opposed to preferences.

Types of "At Riskness"

I would argue that many young women are both in a disadvantaged group and are at risk. The risks are many and varied but can include being at risk of underachieving, have low self-esteem and not discovering their full potential, perhaps as a result of sexual, emotional and physical abuse. All these are increased by lack of opportunity. A woman-only space can provide unique positive opportunities to remedy this.

The specific risks recognised by the school, Education Welfare and myself, in association with the group under consideration, include solvent abuse, non-attendance at school and petty crime.

The Group

The group of young women used to illustrate my arguments are ten 14/15-year-olds. They have been targeted as being in need of assertiveness skills by a teacher at their school. Some are victims of bullying and are subsequently not attending school. Some are involved with substance abuse and petty crime. Outdoor activities are new to them all.

Why Outdoor Education Activities?

I refer to Outdoor Education Activities in preference to Outdoor Pursuits as I believe the primary focus must be with the learning and not the activity. The "pursuit" is not the acquisition of the skills related to the activity but instead the personal development acquired through participation in the activity, ie it's not getting to the top that is important but what you learn on the way up!

The activities included in my work are climbing and abseiling, canoeing, sailing, caving, mountain biking, fell-walking, in addition to initiative and group challenges.

All are activities which I enjoy, something I believe to be crucial to successful facilitation of groups in such activities. Such activities can provide experiences and potential for learning difficult to find in other activities.

The outdoors has traditionally been male dominated, with young people visualising commando exercises on Dartmoor or conquests of poles and great peaks! Women have gradually become involved and many are now widely recognised as professionals and experts in their own right. The recognition often brings with it amazement that women could actually achieve in this arena. As Dr Johnson said, on women speaking in public: "They are like a dog standing on its hind legs. One is not so much surprised they do it well as that they do it at all"!! Along with women succeeding in the Outdoors come positive role models - believable, real and inspiring.

As a women participating and leading groups in outdoor activities there seems to be more pressure on proven leadership skills than with men.

Mixed or separate gender groups have asked me where the "leader" is, or if I am with a male colleague, assume he is the qualified instructor and prefer to take their lead from him. The mostly unspoken hesitancies of groups in seeing a women in a non-traditional role is an issue which should be addressed - such prejudice may be at the root of wrongly assumed roles and abilities of both sexes. Although this sounds negative, this scenario does provide a very good opportunity for role-altering and for assumptions to be challenged. Once a group sees a confident and competent woman leading a potentially hazardous activity and recognises that she is their lead and example, they are forced to question any preconceived images they may have brought, perhaps subconsciously, with them and are faced with a tangible conflict of roles and abilities.

Outdoor activities therefore offer the opportunity for young women to participate in a male dominated arena. If a group of young women is led by a woman there is a unique chance to combine exciting activities within a safe sisterhood environment. This combination can, and often does encourage mutual support, admiration and camaraderie which may be difficult to develop as spontaneously through more usual types of girls' work.

Progression

The commitment of the group must be considered before the group forms. This may well vary from the actual life span of the group. I have been involved with groups of varying length from one-off taster days to long-term projects of 12 months. When considering a programme of activities I would be looking at a minimum commitment of ten two-hour sessions. If a group has a significant potential life span, the quality of work achievable is increased. One-off taster days have their place when working with groups but for significant learning to be achieved I would advocate for more substantial group programmes. Ideally I would see a programme working towards and beyond a residential experience. Knowledge of the life of a group enables the facilitator to target the best work for the time when the group is at its optimum achievement level.

Evaluation

The progression of a group can only be measured by effective and continuous evaluation which in turn can only be achieved by aims and learning outcomes being negotiated. I demonstrate this to groups by explaining if they don't know where they want to go, they won't know if or when they've arrived. This is important if we want young people to make sense of their experience and thus become empowered.

If achievable and realistic goals are negotiated either individually or collectively then failure should be an unlikely outcome. A positive progression for individuals and the group is crucial if potential is to be realised.

The Project

Like many projects, the group I am working with at the moment is subject to LEA funding and reviewed every 12 weeks. This makes long-term planning very difficult. Leeds LEA does however seem to be committed to work with young women and so I tend to (perhaps naively) assume the continuation of funding and plan accordingly. I have an area responsibility for Outdoor Activities with young women, and as such it is accepted that when I work with Groups the programme will include such activities.

The group under consideration was targeted through negotiation with the local high school, the Education Welfare Officers responsible for that area and myself. A week of activity days were then arranged to enable the group to get to know me, try out new activities on a fun level and start to establish ground rules and future activities and programmes. At this point the group is in the "forming" stage of its life. This multi-activity programme enabled the group to engage in activities at a low skill level, enabling them all to achieve from the outset on a visible level. Fun and success is, I believe, the crux of a viable effective group. The learning and development should be perceived as an almost accidental byproduct in these early days.

The hidden agenda of the facilitator should be something that is structured in the facilitator's mind and brought to the forefront at opportune moments - in so doing the group may be introduced to concepts such as goal setting, and negotiating of aims/learning outcomes. If this is done in a non-threatening and non-directive environment, the group will be more ready to accept and be involved with the ideas.

For example, whilst climbing, the group were involved in the ultimate trust exercise in that they were dependent on my ability in setting up a climb, and each other when they were involved with belaying. This trust is more readily transferred, I have found, by young women than boys. After such an experience, young women seem able to embrace this new-found comradeship based in trust and shared experience. The astute facilitator can and should ensure opportunities for evaluating and building on such tangible experiences are not missed.

Demonstrating Change

Positive change with individuals is difficult to quantify and as such, claims of this nature are often questioned. Negative change (eg re-offending or continuing non-attendance at school) are quantifiable and instantly recognised and usually shouted out! Personal development, increased self-esteem and assertion are all qualities which can be ignored, unnoticed or mis-attributed. In order to recognise development the use and monitoring of aims, goal setting and evaluation must be used.

As was noted earlier in this paper, levels of skill and improved confidence in specific activities are easy to recognise. What should be emphasised and expanded on are the unseen changes which go hand in hand with the visible. For example, young women achieving a climb (if this was their aim) will undoubtedly feel an increase of self-esteem and confidence which can be transferred to other areas of life. Young women tend to be more supportive and less critical of each other in Outdoor Activity situations and this is an area to promote and expand on during evaluation. If young women feel safe in a women-only situation they will feel safe to express emotions which they would perhaps hide in a mixed group - or not put themselves in a position where those emotions may be raised. For example, one young women whilst caving became very anxious and started crying. Most of the rest of the group shared her anxiety and through empathy and mutual support were able to come positively through the experience (and did go on to do more caving!) In mixed groups when similar situations have occurred I have noticed the young women within the group showing concern and the boys being almost embarrassed by the emotion (possibly mirroring their own fears).

The use of aims/learning outcomes/evaluation are crucial to the demonstration of positive change within individuals. Aims which are negotiated and seen to be achieved and learning outcomes which are recognised by participants can be effectively re-directed to reinforce position behaviour outside of the group. These aims therefore should be carefully considered prior to commitment to them. It is of little use to set initial aims such as "I want to be able to stand up to bullies at school" or "I want to stop sniffing glue". Goals or aims such as "I want to try something new - I want to complete this activity" will ensure success. These aims can then be renegotiated and developed and ultimately lead to achievement of significant life-changing aims.

Community Integration

Where can this work really lead? After a successful project the positive outcomes achieved should be transferable to other areas of life and subsequently the community.

For example the young women I am working with have an ultimate aim of being rehabilitated into school and to enjoy being there. Apart from my involvement there must be consistent positive reinforcement and support from the school/parents and other agencies (EWO/police). I have been fortunate in gaining the support and involvement of parents and the school for this and other projects I am involved with. The police in Leeds have introduced Youth Service Officers, one of which is involved with a group of boys who I work with weekly. His involvement has been a positive and enlightening experience for all parties. The school I work with and the EWOs are all very supportive of my work and involvement which is half the battle. Local community support is an integral part of the success of a group. If members of a group see that there is a multi agency network wanting them to succeed, there is a greater incentive for this to happen.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would argue strongly for the relevance of Outdoor Education Activities as a positive mode of working with young people at risk. Such experiences can provide immense opportunities for personal development and positive outcomes which can be successfully transferred to potentially negative aspects of life. The success of such skill transfer relies heavily on the skill of the group facilitator both in leading groups and effectively evaluating these experiences. For young women an additional benefit may be gained from being within an all-women space. Assumed negative and secondary roles can be challenged and replaced with positive and assertive modes of behaviour, which

does have a positive impact on other areas of life. The chance to reassert their perspective and direction can be offered through a sensitive and constructive approach to young women participating in Outdoor Education Activity programmes.